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Weinberger Says the U.S. Military Has 'Begun to Catch Up' to Soviet

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WASHINGTON, March 9 — Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger said today that, despite the steady expansion of Soviet military power, "I think we have begun to catch up."

"We've improved our readiness and we have laid the foundation, although it takes longer than I would like, to regain our strategic modernization and strength," Mr. Weinberger said at a news conference.

In seeking to justify the Reagan Administration's proposals for a large military budget, Mr. Weinberger added that "it's absolutely necessary that we continue because it will take us a good five years to regain the strategic and conventional strength and readiness that I think we need to be able to assure the American people that we still have a very credible and effective deterrent."

As the Defense Secretary spoke, the Pentagon made public a new, 107-page version of a booklet entitled "Soviet Military Power" that outlined advances in Soviet forces over the last 18 months. It was also intended to justify the Administration's military budget.

At the White House, President Reagan issued a statement saying: "We must continue to demonstrate our resolve not to allow the military balance to tip against the United States. By demonstrating that resolve, we will not only deter aggression but we will also offer the Soviets a real incentive to accept genuine, mutual arms reduction."

Rebuttals by Democrats

The Soviet Union responded immediately with three critical commentaries distributed by Tass, the official press agency. One called the Pentagon report "a mass of doctored data, full of shamelessly manipulated facts and groundless contentions."

The Administration's effort drew equally quick rebuttals from Democrats. Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, a member of the Armed Services Committee, asserted that the Pentagon report "as usual, focused only on Soviet

strengths and not on any weakness or problems."

Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, another member of the Armed Services Committee, contended, "Secretary Weinberger's exercise in excessive rhetoric and exaggeration, timed to coincide with the defense budget and nuclear freeze votes, is classic scaremongering."

In his news conference, Mr. Weinberger said that "it's very hard to get inside the Soviet mind," but he pointed to what he called "the entirely offensive character" of Soviet military expansion as evidence that Moscow sought "world domination."

The new element in Mr. Weinberger's presentation was his statement about catching up. He said it was "an important and a welcome and a gratifying statement to be able to make." Moreover, the booklet on Soviet military power, although crammed with reports on Soviet weapons, also recorded slowdowns in military production.

Mr. Weinberger disclosed that the Soviet Union had deployed 351 SS-20 medium-range nuclear missiles, up from 250 about 18 months ago and 333 on March 1, the date of information in the booklet. Between 250 and 275 of those missiles are aimed at Europe, Mr. Weinberger said, and the rest are aimed at Asia.

President Reagan has offered in what is known as the "zero option" to forgo deployment of Pershing 2 medium-range missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe beginning in December if the Soviet Union dismantles the SS-20's and similar older missiles.

Mr. Weinberger, asked why the Administration had stopped reporting on the total number of nuclear warheads ready for use by the United States and the Soviet Union, asserted: "It is not a very accurate measure because it doesn't take into account the age, the accuracy or the yield."

U.S. and Soviet Warheads

Pentagon officials, in response to inquiries, said that in 1979 the United States had 9,200 warheads compared with 5,000 for the Soviet Union. They said the United States had 9,000 today, after the scrapping of 200 for age, compared with 8,850 for the Soviet Union.

As examples of new Soviet weapons, the booklet said, an air-launched cruise

missile with a range of 1,800 miles is being developed and is expected to be operational in the mid-1980's. The United States has in operation similar missiles with a range of 1,500 miles.

At least two new Soviet aircraft intended to attack ground targets have been deployed by operational forces, the SU-24 Fencer in Eastern Europe and the SU-25 Frogfoot in Afghanistan. The names were given by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

On the ground, 1,900 new T-80 tanks have been produced, and the deployment of the tanks in Eastern Europe has begun. The T-80 weighs 42 tons, has a speed of 36 miles an hour, and carries a 125-millimeter gun. The new United States M-1 Abrams tank weighs 60 tons, has a top speed of 60 miles an hour, and carries a 105-millimeter gun. The first public picture of the T-80 appears in the booklet.

Work Reported on Space Station

In space, the booklet said, "The development of a large manned space station by about 1990 to maintain a military presence in space is one of the goals of the new heavy-lift launcher systems." It depicted three such launchers, the largest able to lift 130,000 tons compared with the 30,000 tons of the comparable United States vehicle.

For all that, the Soviet Union was portrayed as having economic difficulties that affected military production. "The Soviet economy is besieged by growing resource scarcities, higher production costs and by competing priorities by sectors," the booklet said.

"Food shortages, low labor productivity and transportation disruptions have combined to bring industrial growth to a post-1945 low," the booklet said.

That, in turn, has slowed military production, according to the booklet. Analysts within the Defense Intelligence Agency who prepared the booklet and analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency have generally agreed on that, but they have differed on details of how much, Mr. Weinberger acknowledged.

Tables in the booklet reported that the output of fighter-bombers, utility aircraft, long-range ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, submarines, large surface warships, tanks, armored vehicles and self-propelled artillery dropped in 1981 and 1982.

But the booklet said: "The slower growth of Soviet programs during the period was due to the cyclical nature of Soviet military production. The large Soviet research and development effort, coupled with the observed expansion in military production facilities, suggests that the dollar costs of Soviet military procurement may soon resume their historical growth."